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## Reconstructing Femininity In Margaret Atwood's

### *Lady Oracle*

#### Abstract

Margaret Atwood, a leading Canadian poet, novelist, and critic, often feature women examining their relationships and society. Atwood's works, noted for her feminism and mythological themes, have been regarded as a barometer of feminist thought. Atwood's protagonists are often a kind of 'every woman' characters, or weaker members of society. Atwood's feminist concerns are her wider humanitarian concerns with basic human rights and their infringement by institutional oppression. Feminism is a global as well as a revolutionary ideology. It extends its scope to meet the growing problems of man-woman relationships. Femininity is a set of attributes, behaviors, and roles generally associated with girls and women. It is socially constructed, but made up of both socially – defined and biologically- created

factors. Atwood's *Lady Oracle* is a portrait of Joan Foster, a woman writer, who tries to transform society through her writing and thus deconstructs male discourse in which the victimization and trapping of women are romanticized for centuries. Here Atwood portrays female writers' problems and obstacles which she faces in a phallocentric culture. She struggles hard to overcome these problems created in a patriarchal social set up. Atwood attacks the invisible authority of male writers who destroyed the identity and individuality of a women writer. Atwood's *Lady Oracle* is a complex novel of parody, intertextuality and metafiction. The novel becomes Atwood's guide to men and women to maintain a harmonious relationship irrespective of gender differences between them across time and space.

Margaret Atwood (b 1939), is a leading Canadian poet, novelist and critic whose works often feature women examining their relationships and society. She was born in Ottawa, Ontario. She received a bachelor's degree from Radcliff College in 1962. Atwood's first book of poetry, *Double Persephone*, was published in 1961. She continued writing while teaching English Literature at various Universities in Canada from 1964 to 1972 and while acting as writer-in-residence at the University of Toronto in 1972 and 1973. Atwood's works are noted for her feminism and mythological themes. Her work has been regarded as a barometer of feminist thought. Her protagonists are often a kind of 'every woman' characters, or weaker members of society. Several of Atwood's novels can be classified as science fiction, although her writing is above the normal formulae of the genre. Atwood is an internationally known, read, translated Canadian fictionist. No other writer in Canada of Margaret Atwood's generation has so wide a command of the resources of literature, so telling a restraint in their use as Margaret Atwood. In fact, Atwood is a prolific writer, versatile social critic and a keen feminine observer of Canadian life.

Atwood is increasingly involved and has become a prominent figure in national and international cultural politics. She is an active member of Amnesty International and P.E.N.

She has done wide traveling and wide reading and has worked as Professor of Creative Writing at several Universities. Her involvement with power politics cannot be separated from her writing. Her engagement with cultural and human rights issues not only in Canada but beyond its frontiers distinguishes her as a human rights activist. In an interview with Mendez Egle in 1983, talking about her responsibility as a writer she declared that she wrote “not as a writer, [but] as a human being” (Atwood, *Conversations* 163). At every stage, Atwood has pondered beyond the issues addressed by the feminist movement. Her feminist concerns are “her wider humanitarian concerns with basic human rights and their infringement by institutional oppression.” Atwood’s writing is involved with human rights of women and her fiction is a reflection of the violation of women’s rights. Her fiction provides a comprehensive review of the problems women confront in attaining full recognition and enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedom. The 1995 *Fourth World Conference on Women* held in Beijing, China, echoes forth the message that human rights are women’s rights and women’s rights are human rights.

Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* (1976), a comic masterpiece and a parody of literary forms, portrays the life and experiences of Joan Foster alias Louisa K. Delacourt, a woman writer, who tries to transform society through her writing and thus deconstructs male discourse in which the victimization and trapping of women are romanticized for centuries. Atwood as a feminist used parody in her novel *Lady Oracle* to deconstruct male discursive forms of writing. Here she portrays female writer’s problems and obstacles which she faces in a phallogentric culture. She struggles hard to overcome these problems created in a patriarchal social setup. Atwood attacks the invisible authority of male writers who destroy the identity and individuality of a woman writer. She also projects how a writing of a woman writer is gendered and classed, on the basis of sex. Through this novel Atwood has tried to reconstruct the traditional notions of femininity.

Feminism and Postcolonialism can be seen as having a similar goal in giving a voice to those that were voiceless in the traditional dominant social order. In her book Atwood writes about politics of gender, prescription of feminine role, narrow categorization of women as wives and mistresses. Joan, the protagonist of *Lady Oracle*, typifies the character as escape artist, Joan perceives herself as doomed to a tragic fate: her life, she thinks, is out of her control. On the first page of the novel, she invokes the dual image of the fat lady and the Lady of Shallott as metaphors for her own life, which she says, “had a tendency to spread, to get flabby, to scroll and festoon like the frame of baroque mirror” (*Lady Oracle* 3). Joan thus begins to live the Gothic fiction she creates. Atwood indirectly attacks Romantic fiction, patriarchy’s primary tool to indoctrinate women into the religion of beauty and promise them the happy ending of inclusion into society if only they learn to be beautiful, slim, and tender with an estate and if they learn to market themselves properly. Atwood seems to protest some of the stock images of women in Romantic fiction.

Joan Foster, as a female writer and the heroine of the novel, “plays the part of a metaphorical sibyl, ‘an oracle’, for whom writing is a visionary experience” (Bok 80). The oracle is “beyond herself”. Commenting on the significance of “Oracle” Howells observes in her book *Margaret Atwood* thus:

An oracle is that it is a voice which comes out of a woman’s body and is associated with hidden dangerous knowledge... The voice of the Delphic Oracle was the voice of the god Apollo, or earlier the voice of the Earth Goddess. (67)

Atwood here gives a voice to the voiceless “White Goddess” by changing her into Joan Foster, a writer. The protagonist of the novel is a woman writer who in order to survive turns into a picaro – “a protean figure, who assumes many roles and guises, either successively or simultaneously and who eventually becomes an escape artist” (Freibert 26). Such are the travails of a female writer in a patriarchal society. In western male literary tradition, women

are often criticized for the sin of loving their own images. Creating her heroine Joan Foster as a writer of gothic stories, Atwood parodies gothic literature because gothic fantasy has for centuries romanticized the victimization of women.

The story begins with the narrator's fake suicide, "I planned my death carefully" (1). The protagonist heroine, Joan Foster, composes popular 'costume Gothic' which is aimed at female readers and as well, lives out the genre's fantasies of escape and transformation. Joan is a slim, attractive adult, who conceals her former life, her unhappy childhood when she was chronically overweight. She also hides her secret identity as Louisa K. Delacourt – the name under which Joan publishes her books like *Love, My Ransom*. Thus she experiments with automatic writing and composes a best-selling poetry collection, *Lady Oracle*. In her book Joan scathingly attacks patriarchal culture. The book's success leads her to become prey to a blackmailer who threatens her to her identity. Therefore Joan works out a plan to fly to Rome. She takes an accidental drowning and escapes to Italy using false name. There she reveals the truth about her book and emerges as a serious writer. The metamorphosis from fat child to a stunning young woman represents the magical transformation.

Part two of the novel portrays continuous conflict between mother and daughter. It also perpetuates Joan's obsession with her fatness. During one of the stage shows she wants to be a butterfly in the 'Butterfly Frolic'. Joan is eager to wear coloured cellophane wings while performing the group dance but she is compelled to be a 'mothball' amidst the colourful butterflies. This incident takes a deep-root in her psyche. Being obese, Joan is aware that she cannot wear a butterfly dress. When her mother and teacher play wicked witches and transform her into a mothball, Joan feels desolate and inconsolable. Later on Joan her contact with Aunt Lou changes her mind. Joan is practically brought up by her Aunt Lou. She gives Joan all the warmth, affection and attention, which she needs as a child and teenager. Joan's Aunt Lou is also fat and understands the psychology of obesity. Joan's mother accuses Joan of going to

extremes; she will starve to death and tries to frustrate her by baking goodies and leaving them around in the kitchen to tempt her. Joan realizes, “that in a lesser way she had always done this” (123). Fear of obesity makes Joan gluttonous; fear due to loss of obesity creates a fabricator in her. She begins to tell lies, to protect her self-created fake identity-Louisa Delacourt, her aunt’s name. To realize a new self is to reject totally the bitter past, Joan decides to leave Toronto and go to England. Joan learns the oppressive nature of the patriarchal world and the role of woman as a weak person in the contemporary society from the life of Aunt Lou.

During her journey Joan Foster, through her romance with the “costumed men”, realizes the different male strategies and power politics of exploiting and oppressing women in the disguises of costumes. Atwood deconstructs the roles assigned to women in romantic fiction. The stock image of a heroine in romantic fiction is that she must be beautiful, slim, and tender, probably with an estate if she is an Austen heroine. On the contrary, Joan Foster, the female protagonist in *Lady Oracle*, is big, fat, weighing 245 pounds at the age of 19. At school she is asked to do a teddy bear dance, not the butterfly dance. Her mother advises her to buy clothes that would make her less conspicuous, the dark dresses with tiny polka-dots and vertical stripes favored by designers for the fat. Joan Foster doesn’t want to hide her body, she deliberately buys peculiar, offensive and violently colored dresses, and some of them she gets only in maternity shops. She refuses to let herself diminished, neutralized, by a navy-blue polka-dot sack. Her mother always quarrels with her and the quarrel is on the territory of her body. By portraying Joan’s character as a fat girl in the novel, Atwood questions male attitudes to women’s body thereby presenting her “as a victim of sexist social pressure” (Parsons 107-108). According to Molly Hite, “Fat is a feminist resistance to a society that wishes to constrict women to dimensions appropriate” (Hite 131-132).

In high school Joan plays “kindly aunt and wise woman” character because of her obese appearance, slim girls in her class feel that Joan is neither envious nor flirts. Joan says, she



suppressed her own interest in sex as there was no available 'role for her'. Joan believes that she can change herself by changing her body. Her body has always been her weapon in the struggle with her mother who both over-identifies with her daughter and sees her as an embodiment of the failure of her own "essential femininity". Joan's body is treated as a commodity through which her mother desires to renegotiate her position in the world, for to bear a "pretty" daughter is to reinforce one's own sense of femininity. This feeling grows so strong over the years that Joan starts viewing her mother as a witch. Joan sees her mother astral body after her marriage. She says, "I carried my mother around my neck like a rotting albatross. I dreamed about her often, my three-headed mother, menacing and cold" (213-14).

Joan Foster's father was of an insensitive and irresponsible man, an anaesthetist at the Toronto General Hospital who has two sets of costumes namely "healer" and "killer". He is a heartless wreck for he goes to war abandoning his pregnant wife and does not return home until Joan is five years old. He suspects his wife of infidelity. Joan says:

My father had gone off to the war, leaving her pregnant, with nobody to take pictures of her. "My father didn't come back until I was five, and before that he was only a name". (68-69)

As a doctor, while working for the French underground, her father began to enjoy killing those who were suspected to be "fakes", but in hospital, he repeatedly fouls up people's suicide attempts by bringing them to life again. Joan Foster's mother remains a silent victim at the hands of her father. Thus, she is trapped into marriage by an undesired pregnancy and be stranded in domesticity – "a plastic-shrouded tomb from which there was no exit" (216) for her. She feels so oppressed by her joyless life that she commits suicide by throwing herself down the cellar stairs. Her husband and the female roles expected of her by the male-dominated society are responsible for her death. After the death of her mother, Joan sees her father as the one who murdered her. Joan's mother is a victim of the soul-damaging stereotype created by



patriarchy. Not able to tolerate Joan's appearance as a fat girl, she tries to transform her. She also transforms her face by putting on layers of make-up. Considering beauty and romance as woman's wealth, she becomes a victim of such patriarchal codes of femininity.

The other person, who acts as a sort of fairy god mother is Aunt Lou with whom Joan comes into contact. Aunt Lou is the Chief Public Relations Officer in Toronto. Joan considers Aunt Lou as her savior. Aunt Lou, in contrast to Joan's mother, gives her full human sympathy. Joan is practically brought up by Aunt Lou. She researches into the details of Aunt Lou's unhappy marriage. At the age of nineteen, Aunt Lou is married to a "compulsive gambler". She tries in vain to reform her husband by resisting his gambling habits. Her husband is also a great liar who has least concern and love for his wife. Aunt Lou is also a victim of patriarchy. Her sad tale of victimization further influences Joan's thinking on the man-woman relationships and she begins to assess social relations from a fresh perspective. Joan very much benefits from her association with Aunt Lou. "She learns a great deal about the oppressive nature of the patriarchal world and the helplessness of women in playing out the roles prescribed by men in the contemporary society from the life of Aunt Lou." (Prabhakar 55). These lessons shape her views on unequal man-woman relations.

Joan visits Canadian National Exhibition along with Aunt Lou. This gives her an opportunity to understand the sufferings of women who sacrifice their lives to please others. In the Exhibition she is deeply moved by the sight of a freak show of a fat lady on the tiny platform. After the "death defying" (*Lady Oracle* 112) feat on the high wire, the fat lady had to return to "the freak show to sit in her oversized chair with her knitting and be gaped at by the ticket buyers. That was her real life" (112). The fat lady suffers a lot to entertain the spectators. This is the sad plight of women who suffer to please others. Here Joan relates this event to her "moth ball" (5) dance at school. Joan becomes averse to the patriarchal society's

attitude towards woman's body. Associating woman with body and man with reason is quite unacceptable to her. She is ashamed of the attitudes of male-dominated society.

Joan's experience in the exhibition produces in her intentions to write about forced female roles in society. She decides to do part-time jobs to become self-reliant and independent. She refuses to accept remaining "an idle drone" (36), sitting at home or doing "hard, disagreeable jobs, like washing dishes" (104). She, at last, decides to become a writer to remain become independent through the meaningful work of creative writing for it gives her a chance to adapt an anti-conventional role of women in society. When Aunt Lou dies, she chooses Aunt Lou as her role model and considers a symbol of the victim of a patriarchal society. She narrates in *Lady Oracle* women's experiences of exploitations by the costumed men. She chooses "Louise K. Delacourt" – her Aunt Lou's name as her pen-name for it was not only a kind of memorial to her, but it also serves as a symbol for the victim of a patriarchal society.

Joan starts her adult life in England as a versatile writer. She meets Paul when she falls off a double-decker bus in London. He is a Polish Count, who poses as "Mavis Quilp", the writer of Nurse Novels. He is a compulsive and romantic liar. Joan's experiences with Paul provide her an opportunity to understand the male power politics which subjugates and suppresses women treating them as sex objects. Paul gives Joan trashy books dealing with illicit relations between doctors and nurses. He considers her as a goddess. But Joan does not accept his proposal for he is a threat to her identity as a writer. She does not like his categorizing women as "wives", "mistresses" and "childbearing" machines. To Paul, a woman is an inferior being when compared with man in respect of intellectual pursuits.

As Paul is a representative of a conventional man, Joan leaves him for Arthur, a radical, a pseudo-radical which she realizes later. Prabhakar observes in this connection: "While Paul represents conventional male models in contrast Arthur is a radical who champions the cause

of the oppressed” (57). He pretends to be a revolutionary. Atwood, through the character of Arthur, satirizes the hypocrisy of the pseudo-radicals among men. Joan’s relationship with Arthur gives her yet another chance to understand the male sexual politics. He is closely connected with the “ban-the-bomb movement” (189) who takes part in civil rights movement. “He transforms himself from Lord Russell to Mao. Thus, he is seen as a multilayered personality with various colourful revolutionary costumes” (Prabhakar 58). He proposes to marry her because it would be both convenient and cheap to live with her. She is impressed by his conception of marriage. Impressed by Arthur’s words, Joan is trapped into an unresponsive and apathetic marriage only to realize later that her husband is a sadist to the core.

Joan is shocked to find Arthur, the so-called “leftist-husband”, expecting her to be a cook, a traditional wife. Joan, finding her husband a sadist and a male chauvinist, feels bored and frustrated in her marital life with Arthur. Joan is aware that what Arthur wants is a domestic servant and not a wife in the real sense. Further, Arthur also imposes restrictions that Joan should not wear long fashionable dresses in public because he feels that she may attract the exploiters. He becomes sadistic in the bedroom. In spite of the oddities she plays her role as a dutiful wife. She hopes to win his love someday as she is “an optimist, with a lust for happy endings” (234). He adorns their bedroom with every known form of birth-control device and urges her to take the pill. He fails to understand her ideals and aspirations. However, Joan plays her role as a dutiful wife. At this time she publishes her piece, “Love Defied”. She hides her identity as a writer even from her husband.

She finally publishes her book, *Lady Oracle* on “Male-Female Relationships”. Arthur is shocked to know Joan as a writer after the news of the publication of *Lady Oracle*. He also feels humiliated at her interview on T.V. He behaves as though she has committed “some unpardonable but unmentionable sin” (262). He feels hurt by the theme of the book which assails his misogynist mentality. So he considers his wife a betrayer and involves himself

completely in the activities of Resurgence, a left oriented magazine. He also converts his home into a “campground littered with other people’s garbage, physical, emotional ...” (280) by Arthur’s colleagues. So Joan feels dejected and tries to have reconciliation with him. She takes him for a honeymoon. But she fails in her attempt. Arthur remains unchanged in his attitude towards Joan. This attitude of Arthur “prompts Joan to escape rather than confront – “escape from the overpowering sense of righteousness, aloofness and indifference” (Singh 163). She, in fact, is heartbroken by the sad plight of her life at home.

Arthur’s victimization of Joan Foster and his indifference towards her drive her towards Chuck, the Royal Porcupine, a “homicidal maniac” (303) with rich costumes. He wants to become Joan’s husband. He approaches Joan after her T.V. interview and poses as a “con-crete” poet. He invites her to the show called SQUAWSHT at an art gallery. He tries to influence her with his manly appearance; “red hair,...an elegant moustache and beard, the moustache waxed and curled upward at the ends, the beard pointed . . . wearing a long back cloak and spats, and carrying a gold-headed cane, a pair of white gloves, and a top hat embroidered with porcupine quills” (266) and drags her into sexual immorality. Later on, he behaves more and more like Chuck Brewer and less like the Royal Porcupine and blasts a dynamite for sensational news. He frightens her to come inside his coat and makes “seismographic love” (296). In order to seduce Joan, he changes his costumes and appears to have dressed up in the grotesque style with a tie, – “a Crippled Civilian’s maroon one with a mermaid on it” (299). He urges her to leave Arthur and become close to him. He becomes Chuck Brewer who “cut his hair short and shaved of his beard... no cap, no cane, no gloves, just a pair of jeans and a T-shirt that said *Honda*” (301) on costumes. She understands that Chuck has manipulated her by transforming himself into something more like Arthur. She has to lead a frustrated marital life because of the victimization by her husband. Having known

about Joan's unsuccessful marital life, Paul now reappears with a new look of a successful businessman. He tries to kidnap her from Arthur.

Fraser Buchanan also approaches Joan in the bed room to exploit her sexually through blackmail. He appears with "a tweed jacket with the leather patches and a trendy turtle-neck sweater, plus a pair of black gloves" (*Lady Oracle* 318). He pretends like "a Montreal poet" (288). He has two sets of costumes-as a lover of arts and as a fake-researcher. He threatens Joan telling her the existence of his black notebook which contains the data about the lives of women-his clients. He says: "The fact is, I know a good deal more about you than you think. I know things. I'm sure you would rather keep . . . private. Just between us two" (288). He blackmails her citing a few incidents from her private life. He approaches her for sex and money but she rebuffs him saying that: "I'm married, remember?" (322). Thus Fraser Buchanan, using his black note book containing the personal and public lives of women writers from head to toe, tries to victimize women like Joan Foster. He uses a phallogentric language in his black note book primarily to oppress female writers. He uses money, sex and power as the tools of his business of literary criticism. Joan, at last, steals the black note book and runs away when he is drunk. Tearing out a choice page from the notebook she sends it to Fraser with a warning note: "If anything happens to me the book is in good hands. One word from you and it goes to the police" (324). Thus, Joan gives a fitting reply to Buchanan in his own way.

Now Joan is alone and has escaped from her victimizers. She receives anonymous phone calls, threatening notes and dead animals on the doorstep as signs of malevolence working against her. She suspects that Arthur is responsible for all these things to get rid of her in collusion with Paul, Chuck, and Fraser because most of these sinister things occur when Arthur is not at home. All the male victimizers plan together to do her harm in some

undetectable way. Ultimately, Joan concludes that every man with whom she has come across has had two costumes each. She says:

My father, healer and killer; the man in the tweed coat, my rescuer and possibly also a pervert; the Royal Porcupine and his double, Chuck Brewer; even Paul, who I'd always believed had a sinister other life I couldn't penetrate. Why should Arthur be any exception? . . . The fact that I'd taken so long to discover it made it all the more threatening. (325-26)

Though Joan's knowledge of the true nature of these men does not relent in loving them, her love is unrequited. But ultimately she becomes the hero herself – the “*Lady Oracle*”. She struggles with the literary woes of women and overcomes a variety of patriarchal barriers to establish her literary vocation.

When Joan's literary reputation snowballs, her identity as a writer is distorted when the newspapers publish views and things contrary to what she has said. She foresees a serious threat to her life. So she decides to change of her personality. She dyes her hair, puts on dark glasses, and dons a printed dress and flees to Rome in disguise with the help of her friends and relates her story to a reporter. Her search for a new identity as a writer receives serious threat from the patriarchal world. Her role as a woman writer is not recognized and she finds it difficult to create a space of her own in this sexist society when she refuses to play the traditional stereotyped role. Joan Foster is now released from the stifling cocoon of privacy, freed from the cruel canons dictated by the patriarchal culture and metamorphosed into a creative writer. She ends up as *Lady Oracle* with a meaningful message to both men and women to establish a better harmonious relationship. She expresses the hope that both sexes, in any field, might be given equal opportunities to express. Through *Lady Oracle*, Atwood declares that both men and women are equal as they have same human capabilities and, therefore, gender-based injustices should be fought against in the society.

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